

God So Loved the World

March 10, 2024

For God So Loved the World

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

This is one of the most frequently quoted (and one of the most frequently mis-used) verses in all the Bible. All too often, this quote is used as a springboard to justify a worldview based on shame and inadequacy. Even though it doesn't explicitly say it, for centuries, people have conflated this with “Jesus died for my sins,” a theology which, at its core, is rooted in human depravity, the idea that we're not worthy. All too often, folks stop with “God gave his only Son” and neglect the next verse: “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

As we continue our exploration of forgiveness this Lent, this passage brings me once more to the work of The Forgiveness Project. In particular, the work they've done in prison. Their work of helping people to forgive and seek forgiveness hinges largely on getting people to tell their stories. When I preached a few weeks ago about Desmond Tutu's Revenge Cycle vs. the Forgiveness Cycle, I noted that the Revenge Cycle starts with rejecting our shared humanity, whereas the Forgiveness Cycle starts with choosing to heal, the first step of which is telling the story. What the folks at The Forgiveness Project have found is that a substantial component of almost all the stories they collect in prison is a high level of a sense of shame. At first, you might say, “Well sure! They're in prison, they probably have something to be ashamed of.” But there's a difference between guilt and shame. (For our purposes today, we'll assume that the folks in prison are guilty.)

The folks who work extensively in this field define shame as feeling bad about yourself as a person, whereas guilt is feeling bad about a specific action or behavior. Examples of statements that indicate shame include: “I am worthless,” and “I am unlovable,” and “I am broken.” Shame is a defense mechanism that was once helpful to keep one safe, but that can cause problems later in life. It arises when one feels they are full of flaws and unable to achieve some set standard of perfection or when one wrongly blames themselves for something that was out their control.

On the flip side, examples of statements that indicate guilt include, “I did something wrong,” and “I made a mistake.” Guilt is a healthy emotion that prompts remorse and a desire to make amends.

What the folks from The Forgiveness Project found is that not only do the people they worked with in prison have a heightened sense of shame; that is, a heightened sense of being unworthy, worthless, unlovable, and broken, when the Forgiveness Project works with them to process those feelings of shame, incidents of violence, aggression, and anger decrease. Violence, aggression, and anger decrease when we deal with our shame. Phew!

Friends, what if the genius of “For God so loved the world” isn't “Jesus had to buy our way into heaven because we are so awful,” but rather “you are loved and worthy and cherished by virtue of your very existence,” and God sent Jesus to teach us this and model it for us and help us to

lead lives that tell stories of grace and healing and forgiveness, rather than leave us to stay mired in shame and all of the behaviors that ooze out from there?

Dealing With Our Shame

So, the project I invite you into today in our forgiveness journey is dealing with your sense of shame. Researcher and author Brene Brown, whom many of you have read, suggests this exercise:

“To get at shame triggers, figure out how you want to be perceived around a specific identity. So for example, with regards to motherhood, one might want to be perceived as calm, knowledgeable, educated and not perceived as overwhelmed, stressed out, or unable to balance career and mothering. When we write these down and look at them, we understand the perceptions that make us vulnerable to shame.”

So first, pick a shame category. It might be about your body, work, motherhood, parenting, marriage, your career, your home. Then name three to five ideal identities. That is, name three to five ways you would ideally want to be perceived. Next, name three to five unwanted identities around that category, three to five ways you do not want to be perceived.

Brown then asks us to process those unwanted identities:

- What does this perception mean to me?
- What would it mean to be perceived as an overwhelmed or stressed-out mom?
- Why is it so unwanted?
- Where did the messages that fuel this identity come from?

You see, when we bump up against those unwanted identities, we're really bumping up against shame. Furthermore, Brown notes that shame results in three ways of being: withdrawing, moving toward, or moving against. We move away by withdrawing, hiding, silencing ourselves and secret-keeping. We move toward when we attempt to earn connection by appeasing and pleasing. And we move against when we try to gain power over others, and use shame to fight shame and behave aggressively.

One of the difficulties of working on our shame is that it is often tangled up with guilt. Remember the definition we're working with here is that guilt is feeling bad about something you DID, while shame is feeling that you ARE bad. For example, someone who is in recovery for using drugs or alcohol may feel both guilt and shame if they relapse.

Some things I hear from folks when this occurs include:

- I've let everyone down, including myself.
- I'm a failure for breaking my sobriety.
- I will never be able to overcome my addiction.

Shame Resilience Theory would invite this person to check the facts.

- While relapsing does let yourself and others down, it is a common part of the recovery process and can provide important learning for you to get back on track.
- Relapsing doesn't mean that one is a failure. It is a setback, but does not define one's worth.
- Relapsing doesn't mean forever. With the right tools and supports, lasting recovery is possible.

The reframe here is “I broke my sobriety, but that doesn’t mean that I’m a failure and can never achieve lasting recovery.” The action, then, is to take responsibility, seek help, seek connection, and develop strategies for health.

Conclusion

Shame rears its ugly head in so many contexts. For the first couple of years of the pandemic, I heard lots of stories of people feeling shame when they got COVID, feeling that they had somehow behaved in a way that was morally lacking. People often feel shame:

- When we actually do do something wrong.
- When we say something hurtful.
- When we break a promise.
- When we don’t get a job or a promotion.

All of this brings us back to the forgiveness cycle vs. the revenge cycle. In the forgiveness cycle, we choose to heal, tell the story, name the hurt, reframe the relationship. In the case of shame, reframing the relationship looks like reclaiming one’s inherent worthiness. In the context of our scriptures today, reframing our experience of shame looks like internalizing that we are God’s beloved.

Friends, God so loved the world that God sent Jesus, not to condemn us, but that we might have life. Our passage goes on to say that judgment comes when we love the darkness more than the light. Around shame, our judgment comes when we chose to hold on to our internalized unworthiness rather than basking in our true nature as children of God. My prayer for all of us this week is that we might be compassionate with ourselves, demonstrating our love of God by internalizing that we are worthy of God’s love of us. May it be so. Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
John 3:14-21
March 10, 2024